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ABSTRACT

Speeches and compositions often become mere word lists, obscuring the message's true meaning with too many words. This paper shows that the words "use," "of," and "it" can be eliminated from writing and speech, making communications shorter, more understandable, and more efficient. Examples are provided. (RL)

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Methods, Procedures, and Techniques for Extreme Ultra-High-Speed Optimizing of Language Systems Analysis for the Amelioration of Signal-to-Noise Ratio and Comprehension Band-width between Transmitter and Receiver in the Propagation, Propulsion, and Radiation of Verbal Communication

or

HOW TO DEBUG YOUR WRITING AND SPEECH

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Did you ever get the feeling that words were fighting you instead of serving you? We too often find that words are our masters instead of our servants. Why? We use too many words. Words get in our way. They obscure our thinking. They obstruct our communication.

I suppose we all have some deep-seated psychological urge to gush out great quantities of words in the hope that our listeners, or our readers, will pick and choose just the right ones they need to dope out what we're trying to say. I'm convinced that many times we simply spit out bushels of words to cover up feelings of inadequacy. We camouflage to cover up the confusion in our thinking.

We forget that what we say is not quite as important as what our readers or listeners think we say. When we speak, we assume that the receiver has not only listened but has perceived as we have intended. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When people have to fight through mountains of words to get our message, they tire before they understand. They never know what we intended to say because the struggle to understand is too overpowering.

Among professional writers -- particularly advertising writers -- the saying is that 500 words is easier to write than 50 words. A 50-word message requires that each word count, that each word does something. Recall, if you will, the comparative difficulty you have composing a telegram as compared to writing a letter.

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What should we do? Mr. Rudolph Flesch has told us: use short words and short sentences. How can this be done easily?

I contend that there are three bugs that crop up in written and spoken language. If eliminated, these bugs will carry away with themselves 90% of the confusion in our communication. This is a wild claim.

Yet, I reiterate: as we eliminate these three bugs, we simplify and shorten our writing and speech to the point where understanding and comprehension come far more easily to the people to whom we communicate.

What do I mean by simplifying? Just look at the title of this very talk as an electronic engineer might have composed it:

> Methods, Procedures, and Techniques for Extreme Ultra-High-Speed Optimizing of Language Systems Analysis for the Amelioration of Signal-to-Noise Ratio and Comprehension Band-width between Transmitter and Receiver in the Propagation, Propulsion, and Radiation of Verbal Communication

Now clearing up the confusion, we could rewrite that title this way:

> How to Debug Your Writing and Speech

I must admit that this confusion is contrived to make a point. And the point simply is this: the original title contains one of three bugs, and that bug crops up four times.

Without further confusion, let's identify our three bugs. They are

USE
OF
IT

These three bugs, exterminated at every opportunity, will eliminate much of the confusion in what you write and say. In and of themselves (and that's one of that serves a purpose), these bugs account for little confusion. But they are disease carriers. They carry with them confusion in communication.

Once these bugs are fumigated, you will be forced to rework your sentences into forms that will be shorter and far more understandable.

My contention is that these three bugs -- use, of, and it -- are the carriers of confused language. Eliminate them first without mercy, and your language will clear up. Let's look at a few examples. Here's a sentence lifted from an actual technical paper:

> The requirement of a high negative potential for the point was undesirable and this starting means was abandoned.

Now, strike out the of. The two words ahead of it now are obviously unnecessary. Now, we can simply say that

A high negative potential was undesirable . . .

We have cut out excess words and so we get to the point immediately. Let's look at another one. Here, we will find that the of is a clue to genuine misstatement of fact. This becomes apparent once we debug the of. Here's the quotation, straight from a real engineer's mouth:

Investigating the use of stainless and superalloy materials for operation in the temperature range of 400° to 1400°F is becoming of increasing importance.

We have three of bugs here plus one use bug. Getting rid of the first of shows that everything ahead of it is useless. Furthermore, we suddenly realize that the subject of the sentence should not be investigating. The subject should really be stainless and superalloy materials.

The second of is a clue to more excess verbage. We can fumigate it out plus the five words ahead of this it and never lose a thing.

Let's knock out the last of on general principles. We discover that we can change from the passive to the active voice. Now our sentence is alive and direct. Most important, we now say something others can understand instantly:

> Stainless and superalloy materials for 400° to 1400°F are increasingly important.

Better yet, we now see the opportunity for a really punchy sentence:

> Stainless and superalloy materials are increasingly important for 400° to 1400°F (service or whatever they are really important for).

We have met two of our bugs face to face now. The use bug usually travels with the of bug, though the reverse is not true. The of bug is quite independent and can be found many places, all by itself. But the use bug usually shows up in a habitat like this:

> The use of semiconductor diodes for frequency multiplication ....

The use bug is just as deadly in its synonymous forms ... such as utilization or requirement. The of bug is the giveaway in any case. The use bug in this context never tells anything more than you are going to learn later anyway. It adds volume, but not clarity. So shoot it dead on sight.

The third bug is the it bug. The flappers in the Roaring Twenties were supposed to have it. But it in composition won't do anything for you today. I must admit that the word it is indispensable in certain places -- as are use and of sometimes.

It, for example, is a convenient pronoun that shortens sentences a great deal when placed next to a clearly defined antecedent. The it that I am after is the it that refers to nothing, that has no antecedent, that never tells us anything that we wouldn't know otherwise.

Here's the classic habitat of the it bug:

> In simple diodes, it has been found that if a grid is used as the anode, the cathode will start more easily.

If you search for the antecedent of this it, you will find it to be the entire sentence....when reduced to its essentiality. Let's strike out the it bug and we wind up with a sentence that gets its message across very well:

If a grid is used as the anode in simple diodes,
the cathode will start more easily.

We see the opportunity to eradicate a totally useless phrase once the it bug went. This phrase -- (it) has been found that -- is really rather extraneous. If this had not been found out, the author could not have said it to begin with.

The it bug often introduces totally useless phrases; like these

It is thought that....
It is important to note that....
It is interesting to know that....
It has been stated that....

Each of these it-phrases really poses a rather senseless question. Look at them one by one.

First, it is thought that is patently obvious. If the thing had not been thought, it could not be said. If the person who did the thinking is important, he should be quoted directly to give real meaning. If he remains anonymous, his thinking is obviously not worth noting.

Second, it is important to note that should be restated to give the reason for the importance. If the reason is not worth stating, just go ahead and say what is to be said for its own sake.

Third, it is interesting to know that should never be needed. If not interesting, it should not be stated. If it has interest, the interest should be self evident.

Fourth, it has been stated that tells us nothing unless the person so stating is identified and quoted directly. Otherwise, just get on with the business at hand.

Let's summarize. I could say to you:

> It is the use of "it," "use," and "of" that bugs your copy.

I'd rather say:

> "It," "use," and "of" bug your copy.

Get rid of these bugs in what you say and write, and you'll make better use of it.

- 30 -